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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the findings of a questionnaire study comparing government aid to private schools in Australia and the United States. The study drew questions from those raised in a hearing of the Senate Committee on finance about tax credits for private schools. The paper covers the answers of ten Australian respondents, given in the form of composite summaries on each topic considered. It was found that Australian parents chose non-government schools largely for religious and social reasons. Government aid has had no special regulatory effects on non-government schools, but pressures for more regulation are emerging. Government schools are more comprehensive both in terms of regions served and courses. Vocational and special education curricula impose costs on the government sector which the private sector does not have to provide. However, non-government schools offer extracurricular activities for which student and teacher participation is required, unlike in government schools. Student achievement is higher in non-government schools, due to their more selective clientele and emphasis on test success. Non-government leaders believe their schools serve a fundamentally religious or ethical purpose, while the government schools accept the values of the secular culture and must be socially comprehensive if they are to achieve their social mission. The final section deals with the major differences in institutional arrangements for students and teachers in the private and public schools. The areas covered are personality development and student discipline, academic achievement, staff attitudes and activities, the issues of choice and conformity, and the classroom environment. (CG)

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PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND NATIONAL POLICY:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AUSTRALIA AND THE U.S.A.

by

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Comparative and International Education Society (11th, Hamilton, New Zealand, 21-24 August, 1983).

PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND NATIONAL POLICY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AUSTRALIA AND THE UNITED STATES

Thomas H. Jones

Although the United States and Australia are similar in many ways, their patterns of financing elementary and secondary education are quite different. Virtually all Australian primary and secondary schools are funded from State and Federal sources. Publicly administered "government" schools receive nearly one hundred percent funding from tax revenues. Privately administered, "non-government" schools receive less than one hundred percent of their income from taxation. But the amounts that non-government schools receive are still substantial. In the united States, on the other hand, privately administered schools receive virtually no government funds. And this difference provided an impetus for the present study.

Armed with these thoughts but few concrete facts on data the writer set out to design an empirical investigation. There were constraints. The writer, a Professor of Education Administration at the University of Connecticut in the United States, would be in Australia for only five months. He had never been in Australia before and had little prior knowledge of the country, beyond that described above. The university where the writer would be based, New England, was located in Armidale, New South Wales, far from any major population centres. The study would have to be fitted in amidst teaching and other duties. And research funds necessarily would be quite limited.

For reasons mentioned above the present study had to be designed in the United States where little recent literature on Australian school finance was available. Among the most helpful documents were those of the U.S. Australia Education Policy Project with its (U.S.) headquarters at the School of Education, Stanford University,[4] the writings of Donald Erickson and his colleagues on government aid to private schools in the Canadian province of British Columbia, and the reports of Joel Sherman and Harold Noah. The works of Greeley and Rossi

and Greeley, McCready and McCourt discuss the particular dynamics operating in American Catholic schools, and some Australian literature was sent to America through the good offices of the University of New England. But these investigations - helpful as they were - dealt with specific aspects of the aid question, for example legal issues or religious education. There was no literature which provided a broad overview.

Accordingly, the writer set out to produce a broad overview of the type his literature search had failed to uncover. Since the debate in the United States is still being conducted at the public policy level rather than the planning or implementation level, policy making would be the focus of the present investigation. It seemed sensible to begin at the beginning: that is, to ask policy makers what they were doing and how it was working out. Accordingly the broad research question for study was formulated as follows:

> How do Australian educational and political leaders view their Federal Government's school and policies?

The task was to develop a series of specific questions based on this general question. The list of specific questions would have to be drawn up so that they were helpful to the policy debate in the United States.

In 1978 the United States Senate's Committee on Finance conducted hearings on the question of income tax credits for private schools. Persons from more than one hundred United States organisations, representing a wide variety of political and religious persuasions, made prepared statements and took part in related discussion. All this information plus senators' questions and discussions were transcribed for the official record. The testiminy covered every conceivable aspect of the private school aid issue from taxes, to school curriculum, to school sport, to morals and religion.

The 1978 Hearings proved to be crucial to the design of this study. They were sufficiently comprehensive to provide the desired breadth of subject matter. Yet the testimony was specific enough to facilitate construction of a semi-structured interview questionnaire for use with Australian policy makers. Once the questionnaire was drawn up, university colleagues of the researcher examined the questions for salience and clarity. Modifications of the original questionnaire were made. Colleagues at both the Universities of Connecticut and New England helped in this process.

Content of the Report

The report is written in four chapters with related appendices. The present paper draws from Chapter I. Chapter II, contains some background information on the schools of the two countries. A brief history forms the background for discussion of current schooling arrangements in America and Australia. Then a typology for government policy is presented.

Chapter III contains specific questions and responses given by the ten interviewees. When questions elicited convergent opinion-responses, the similarities are noted. For divergent opinion-responses the areas of disagreement among respondents are highlighted and discussed.

Chapter IV contains the conclusions and implications of the study. These observations deal with differences among respondents regarding the nature of schooling, the role of school in socialization to adult life and the role of religion and social class in school choice. The chapter concludes with a mention of some policy issues which are emerging in Australia and the United States.

SUMMARY

There is a very high degree of convergence among these ten leaders' opinions. Communication among the school sectors is free flowing. Each group knows what the other is up to and how they think. Taken together these facts pretty well lay to rest the question of "insider" versus "outsider" knowledge posed at the beginning of this chapter. People in one sector hold opinions remarkably similar to those held by persons in any other sector. And the overwhelming convergence of opinions may well be the study's most surprising finding.

The remainder of this summary is devoted to drawing a composite profile of the respondents' answers. The composite is on a topic-by-topic basis rather than a question-by-question basis. Differences amongst responses will be pointed out where relevant. But the overwhelming impression is one of similarity among them.

Parents choose non-government schools for a variety of reasons, but the two most important are social and religious. Religious considerations are likely to be more important for Catholic and systemic schools; social considerations are likely to play a bigger role in Protestant and independent schools.

Government aid has had no special regulatory effects on non-government schools in the sense of requiring them to do what they otherwise would not have done. But pressures for more regulation are emerging. The chief effect of aid to date has been on the Catholic sector, which has achieved much more satisfactory resource levels over the last eight years.

Government schools are more comprehensive than non-government schools in two senses of the term. First they must operate everywhere including small rural schools in every corner of the nation. Small schools impose additional per pupil costs not required in larger schools. And, since non-government school aid (which goes mainly to larger schools) is based on what government schools spend per pupil, there may be some bias. The second sense in which government schools are more comprehensive is course offerings at the secondary level. General, vocational and special education curricula impose costs on the government sector which the non-government sector does not have to provide. Its clientele are more academically oriented.

On the other hand non-government schools do have extra curricular sport, religious and cultural activities for which pupil participation is required. Supervision of these extra activities is expected and is a condition of teacher employment in non-government schools. Such activities are not required of teachers or pupils in government schools. And this would be a major difference between the two sectors.

Student academic achievement is higher in non-government schools, due to their more selective clientele and to the emphasis which those institutions place on test success. Students in such schools tend to be satisfied because their education is a bit more likely to lead to social and financial success later in life. But they may find their school days to be extremely demanding. Government schools allow their students more free time after school and on weekends.

School fees are a problem in several ways. The high cost of some schools means that most families can't afford to send their children. This in turn creates social distinctions between "haves" and "have-nots" which carry over into adult society. On the other hand, some lower level of fees may be desirable, partly on the "user should pay" principle and partly on the accountability principle. Parents may take more interest if they pay out of pocket and institutions may be more

accountable to parents and children if they are paid directly, although some respondents disagree with this.

All sectors cooperate in supply and use of instructional support personnel - e.g. coordinators of curriculum, psychologists. This cooperation helps break down administrative and personnel barriers which otherwise might exist. But present levels of cooperation are threatened by budget cuts.

Religious observances are not permitted in government schools and religious education has been a big curricular problem. Non-government schools do not have to fact this problem because they do not have to cater to all sorts of religious persuasions and non-religious attitudes.

The Catholic Church is a strong supporter of non-government school aid. Protestants are more variable. All major political parties are supportive, and the judicial issue has been settled in favour of aid. For all these reasons Australia is very likely to continue to fund non-government schools, in some form, for the foreseeable future.

Generalisations About School Sectors

In the questioning, respondents were asked to characterise entire educational sectors. They all expressed the view that their generalisations would be incorrect in specific cases. Despite this caveat respondents felt there was something to be gained from generalisation and sectorial characterisation.

Interviewees felt most comfortable in generalising about questions dealing with law, finance, politics and administration. These categories seem to be the ones which distinguish government and non-government schools most uniformly and completely.

Another area for generalisation was people in schools. These answers dealt with people's motivations, their family backgrounds, aspirations for the future, recreational and general attitudes toward society. Respondents' thought categories in these areas were similar. But their responses tended to show more disagreement on the substantive issues.

A third set of thought categories dealt with classroom environments. Their respondents were most reluctant to generalise. Apparently, excellent teaching and learning occurs within all sectors. Unfortunately, so does the inferior variety.

As a general rule system administrators found generalisation easier than school principals. This is not surprising. It merely reflects the different nature of leadership activities at the two levels. Principals are more oriented to the problems of curriculum, pupils and staff relations. System leaders deal more with politics, law and finance.

Two Constructions of Reality: Religion and Social Class

This section deals with differing social orientations which underlie choice of school sectors. Considerations here relate to philosophy, law, finance and politics.

Religion and Freedom of Choice

Non-government leaders believe their schools serve a fundamentally religious or ethical purpose which is based on Judeo-Christian traditions. This purpose transcends the mere daily activities of the school. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that the core purpose is reflected in all daily activities. In either interpretation, the core purpose achieves its importance because of its permanent nature. Children will first internalise this higher purpose to their lives, then carry it with them long after they leave school. It will sustain them throughout adult life.

This, of course, is an idealisation in the sense that not every single child will be so affected. But the ideal does justify the schools existence in the respondents' minds. It is what activates principal and staff each day. It motivates policy and practice. Even if some parents seek temporal advantages for their children more than transcendental ones, still the latter do rub off along with everything else.

Religion and ethics, of course, are not altogether a matter for the school. They must be fostered in the home as well. And since homes differ in the attention they give to this matter, one school - or one type of school - is not for everybody. Schools should vary according to family tastes and families should match themselves to the right school. But this privilege should not be left to the very rich. Everyone should have the opportunity, and the only way to effect this is to give tax funds to various privately administered schools.

The ideal, then, begins with the individual not society as a whole. A good society starts with good individuals. And good individuals emerge from free choice in schooling. If a few families choose inappropriately, too bad. But individual error is far preferable to state compulsion. In this sense participation in the non-government school ideal is entirely voluntary. The ideal is not undermined if some people choose not to accept it.

Social Class and the Commonwheel

The government school accepts the values of the secular culture. As an institution it takes no stand on the transcendental question but is concerned instead with life on earth. Traditions of all sorts play a minor role; guides for activity come from the rapidly changing contemporary civilization, not from any fixed view of life.

According to respondents the role of the government school is to act as an independent force in the child's life. It should not merely reflect the values held by a particular family. It should broaden the child's view by exposing him to the culture as a whole, not one narrow part of it.

The government school must, therefore, be socially comprehensive if it is to achieve its expressed social mission. In order to get the breadth of views and experiences of each social group it must have children from all social groups. If only low income students attend, the government school cannot fill its mission.

For this reason social class tends to be the most frequently mentioned category in government leaders' responses. The mingling of various social classes in school seems to fulfil the same role in government leaders' responses that religious values etc. fill for non-government leaders. They are the most often mentioned topics. They seem to be the over-arching consideration.

The emphasis on social comprehensiveness means that the ideal of the government school is much more constraining on individual members of society. Non-government schools can get along fine without participation from large segments of society. But government schools cannot. If all recognizable groups do not participate in government schooling, including the upper classes, its social ideal cannot survive. If non-government schools are financed too generously government schools will not be comprehensive schools but pauper schools.

The Rebuttal

The positions of each sector are of course known to the other. Government school people have particular difficulty with the religious argument in the case of the high fee Protestant schools. If religion is so important why do Protestant denominations have schools which a

majority of their communicants cannot afford to attend? (The answer should be that separate schooling is not required in the Protestant religion).

Others reply that government schools are mediocre and uniform. Comprehensive they may be. But in trying to be all things to everyone they aren't really satisfying to anyone.

How much variety is in the common interest? The conflict between the religious/ethical and social class arguments cannot be reconciled but only compromised.

The Nature Of Schooling

In this section we consider people in schools pointing out some of the major differences in institutional arragements for students and teachers.

Personality Development And Student Discipline

Since school values in the non-government sector are relatively timeless, they don't change with the whims or fashions of the present generation. Student character is something to be shaped along well defined lines. And non-government schools have the mechanisms at their disposal to do so. Number one in importance is parent interest and home support. Second is a more controlled school environment. The non-government school can decide on the maximum amount of disruptive, socially-deviant behaviour it wishes to tolerate. Third is academic emphasis in the curriculum. Fourth, after school activities like sport and drama are compulsory. And fifth, moral and religious education is integrated into the curriculum.

Government schools do not have these control mechanisms to the same degree, and their student development goals are different. They want each child to mature and develop along the lines that child wishes for himself with appropriate advice not only from parents but from other parts of social as well. In the government school it is not so much a question of conformity to their pattern as finding your own pattern. This may be less rigorous but more enjoyable.

Academic Achievement

Non-government leaders realise that academics are the major consideration for most of their parent clientele. Therefore these schools are mainly for academic pursuits, particularly at the secondary level. Respondents believe that non-government schools probably start with brighter students and then place them in an atmosphere where expectations are high. Even for those not going on to tertiary study the demanding atmosphere is still a good preparation for entry onto the labour market.

Academics are certainly an important part of government schooling, but they do not play the same central role that they play in the non-government sector. According to respondents government school parents don't always expect their children to do well in school. They hope they will. But they don't expect that they will, because parents' own school success may have been limited. Government schools offer all sorts of studies besides strictly academic ones in order to help children find what they are best at.

Staff Attitudes and Activities

In non-government schools the teacher is the main link between the educational ideal and the daily life of the child. More than anyone else it is up to the individual teacher to shape the child's personality. Hence school teaching is considered a vocation. Teachers must put in long hours not only in the classroom but in sport

and other activities. Since students are generally highly motivated to learn, actual teaching skills are less important in this sector than in the other sector. Teacher personality and character are more important.

Responses referring to government school teachers fall into two thought categories which might be labelled "professional" and "industrial worker". As a professional the government school teacher is likely to have developed more teaching skill than his colleague in the non-government sector. He spends more time planning lessons and is in touch with the very latest trends in his teaching field. Since his students are not necessarily highly academic, it is up to the teacher to give his classroom an exciting and stimulating atmosphere.

The government school teacher in his role as industrial worker has a rather different reputation. He is not required to see the children outside the classroom, although he may organise activities voluntarily. He goes on strike for higher wages and shorter hours. (To date teachers in the other sector have not done so). The degree of actual hardship caused by strikes is in much dispute. But strikes do create in some minds the image of a teacher as a bureaucrat with a clock-watching mentality more concerned about the conditions of work than the work itself. This of course is a stereotype not a quotation, but it does serve to identify one of the major attitudinal divisions which exist in Australian society.

Choice And Conformity

Both sectors emphasise choice and conformity, but in different

ways. In the non-government sector schools distinguish themselves from one another. They offer a slightly different range of courses, extra curricular activities etc. in a hope to attract families. The choice comes in matching a particular child to a particular school. But once there the student is expected to conform to its rules and procedures. He is expected to participate in many activities. He must integrate himself fully into the character of the school.

In the government sector one school conforms pretty much to every other. It doesn't matter much which school the child attends. But once in school the child has a greater chance for self direction and development. There is no one image for the school and fewer behavioural norms to be followed.

Thus in the government sector there is conformity among schools but choice within them. In the non-government sector there is conformity within schools but choice among them.

Classroom Environments

The final set of thought categories deals with pedagogy: learning theory, curriculum and instruction. Respondents agree that these are important considerations. They distinguish individual schools from one another, but not entire school sectors.

Catholic and independent schools tend to be a bit more traditional in their teaching and learning methods than their government school counterparts. But very experimental schools also can be found in the non-government sector. There is no one Catholic curriculum or government school teaching method. Teaching method, then, seems to be more a matter of pragmatism than of social class, philosophy or religion. And different forms of pedagogy are adaptable to a wide variety of school administrative forms.

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